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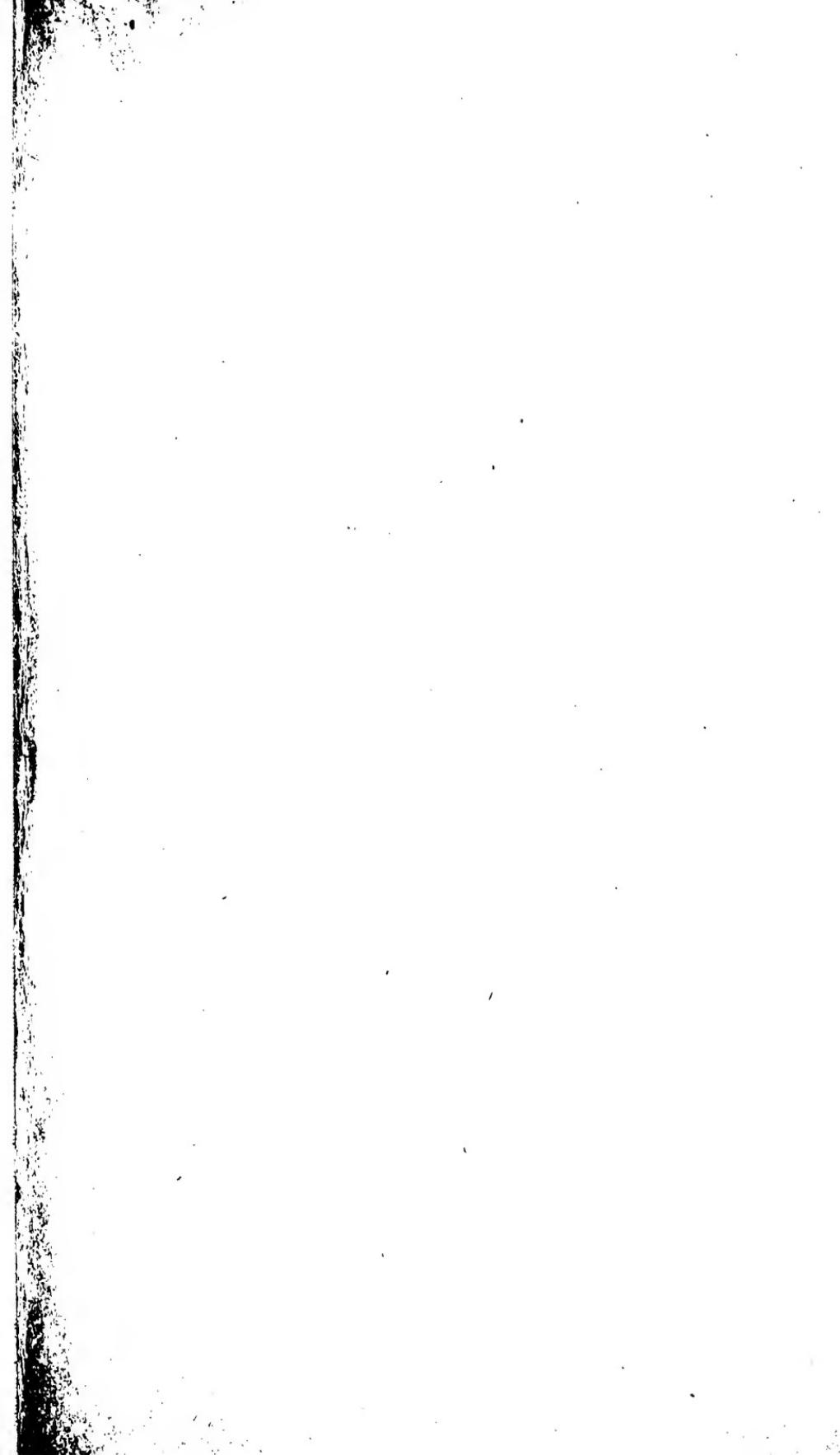
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SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF SCOTS LITERATURE

[*Note.*—This paper was originally delivered as a lecture, and the lecture-form has been retained.]

BURKE ‘knew not how to frame an indictment against a nation’: in attempting to characterize a nation’s genius I have undertaken a task only less presumptuous. Arnold, indeed, has shown us a way; but Arnold’s way is not easily followed. Its logic is not particularly convincing: if you erect judgements of taste into first principles, you can establish wellnigh any conclusion, by citing those instances that make for your views, and omitting those that make against them. If nevertheless we accept many of Arnold’s conclusions, we do so not from faith in his method but from a general confidence in his knowledge and literary tact. It may prove that in such questions no other method is available, and we must follow it with such knowledge and tact as we possess. But first it might be well to clear the ground by reviewing, however rapidly, the historical facts.

In the dawn of our history we find Scotland occupied by four distinct nations—Angles, Britons, Scots, and Picts. The second and third of these nations were Celts; so possibly was the fourth.¹ But it was the language of the first that prevailed. It did not prevail by force of arms, as English did in South Britain. The advance of the Angles was checked by the Pictish victory of Dunnichen (A.D. 685); and the chance of English conquest became still more remote when, in A.D. 844, the Scottish king, Kenneth MacAlpine, united Scots and Picts under his sceptre. Finally, in the great battle of Carham (A.D. 1018), the Scoto-Pictish king, Malcolm II, annihilated the English power, and annexed their territory down to the Tweed. In the same year he succeeded peacefully to the throne of Strathclyde, and Scotland as we know it became one kingdom. In this kingdom the Celts were predominant in numbers and in power: the English were a defeated minority. Yet their language and literature presently prevailed in the Lowlands. How did this come about? Doubtless the *vera causa* lay simply in the superiority of the English language to the Celtic as a means of human intercourse. Yet that cause could not have operated—it certainly could not have operated so rapidly—but for a circumstance which placed English in a better position for linguistic competition than it was in after Carham. That circumstance was the Norman Conquest. Among the English refugees who fled to Scotland before the Conqueror were Edgar Atheling and his

¹ The Picts are now believed to have been a mixed race; their speech was apparently Celtic, but of the Cymric not the Gaelic branch. See Dr. Watson’s *Place-Names of Ross and Cromarty*.

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sister Margaret. Margaret became Malcolm Canmore's queen, and at once set about the anglicization of the court and the Church. Moreover, there was already in the Lothians a considerable English population, which, when reinforced by the stream of refugees, gave English that substantial weight of numbers for want of which the Normans in England were gradually absorbed when they had been cut off from France. Thus the 'Englisch' of the Lothians gradually penetrated far into the Lowlands. When Barbour wrote the national epic in the middle of the fourteenth century he wrote it in Scots, i.e. in Northern English. The ascendancy of Scots was well assured by the time James I came home with English tastes and an English queen. In his reign Scots superseded Latin in the law-courts. His murder gave the queen a horror of the old royal residence at Perth, and she retired upon Edinburgh, which during the fifteenth century came to be recognized as the sole capital. By James IV's reign Edinburgh was definitely the seat of the Scottish Government, and its language—the 'Englisch' of the Lothians—had become the language of the court and the standard for the country in much the same way as the London dialect became the standard for the southern kingdom.

The rest is a story of decay. It is a singular reflection that the Reformation, which did so much for the higher life of Scotland, heralded the decay both of the Scots language and of the Scots vernacular literature. The bond of a common Protestantism drew Scotland into the arms of English as well in culture as in politics. Before the close of the sixteenth century, our Reformed writers had begun to abandon the pure Scots and to write a kind of English-Scots for the edification of the faithful in both kingdoms. Scots books, too, began to be published in London. After the Union of the Crowns it was inevitable that Scots should cease to be the language of the court, and presently of the gentry. And when the Authorized Version was ordered to be read in churches, Scots must gradually cease to be the language of the pulpit, and sink into the position of a dialect. It is some reproach to the Scottish Reformation that it produced no Scots version of the Bible. Nesbit's Scots New Testament had some vogue : but the Reformers relied in the main upon English versions. A Scots Bible might have saved the language. Yet, in another point of view, it is difficult to regret a circumstance which made Scotland familiar with the most august example of Elizabethan prose, and gave her graver sons command of that 'stately speech' which impressed Wordsworth so deeply.

The great eighteenth-century revival does not alter these essential facts. The Scots of Burns is not the Scots of Dunbar. For besides the one national Scots language there had always existed, and do still exist, numerous local Scots dialects, each spoken by the common folk in its own province. What Burns did was to make a new blend, conserving (though sometimes in adulterated and anglicized forms) much of the old literary Scots, but lacing it with a strong infusion of local dialect, drawn principally of course from his native Ayrshire, though experts have detected in his vocabulary scraps of the Mearns dialect that his father spoke. And Burns knew this very well :—

I set me down to pass the time,
And spin a verse or twa o' rhyme
In hamely westlin' jingle.

Stevenson was the last great writer to essay the old literary Scots as a vehicle for poetry :—

No bein' fit to write in Greek,
I wrote in Lallan'.

But the poet who gives such a reason confesses that Scots is a dead language.

The history of Scots literature naturally runs a parallel course. It was the last of European literatures to appear, and the first to decay. Not till Alexander III's reign did Scotland attain that degree of stability and civilization without which literature cannot flourish. Then indeed it began to put forth some shoots. Our first poet—the half-mythical Rhymer—is said to belong to Alexander's reign. But Alexander's death plunged the country into a struggle for national existence. The oldest genuine fragment of Scots verse tells how

When Alysandr our King was deid,
That Scotland led in love and lé,
Away was sons of ale and breid.
Of wine and wax, of gamyn and glé.
Our gold was changed into leid.
Christ, born into Virginitie,
Succour Scotland, and remedie,
That stad is in perplexitie.

From this perplexity Bruce delivered her ; and it was fitting that the first great Scots poem should be that in which Barbour celebrated the exploits of the hero-king. Barbour's *Brus* is native Scots.¹ The native tradition was continued by Wyntoun, and (less purely) by Blind Harry, as well as in brilliant sketches of low life like *Cockelbie's Sow*, *Christis Kirk on the Green*, *Peblis to the Play*, and the *Wife of Auchtermuchty*.

But for full efflorescence the Scots stock needed grafting. If James I is not the author of the *King's Quair* (and Professor Lawson has not quite convinced me that he is not), he at least brought the love of Chaucer to Scotland, and in that way helped to found the famous school of Scottish Chaucerians. Its greatest figures are Henryson, Dunbar, and Gavin Douglas ; but Dunbar's *Lament* names many other 'makars'. It reached its acme at James IV's court, and its catastrophe on Flodden Field. Scholars at one time believed that Dunbar himself was in that 'serried phalanx' which fell there around the king. However that may be, with the king dead and the court dismembered, the flower of Scots verse was 'wede away'. Through the sixteenth century many late blooms appear, often of great beauty, in the poems of Scott, Montgomery, and Hume. But the times grew steadily less propitious to pure literature than to satire and religious controversy. What Arnold says of the English spirit at that time might be said with less exaggeration of the Scottish—it entered into the prison of Puritanism, and the key was turned on it for two hundred years.

In the eighteenth century, interest in the old Scots literature, never quite extinct, was rekindled by the publication of Ramsay's *Evergreen*—a collection, as he described it, of Scots poems 'wrote by

¹ I do not imply that it was independent of foreign, especially French, influences ; but it was not a variety of, or an adaptation from, the English of London.

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the Ingenious before 1600'. The torch was passed on to Fergusson and to Burns, in whose hands it blazed up for one brilliant moment. In a sense, Burns was the last of the 'makars'. He inherited the tradition of their technique. It would be difficult to prove that Burns invented a single verse-measure. Yet that is far from being the whole truth : Burns was also the heir to another tradition. For alongside the main stream of literary Scots there had always flowed another—a strong, turbid stream of popular literature. And this did not sink into the sands, as the courtly poetry did, but flowed on through the eighteenth and far into the nineteenth century in oral tradition of ballad and song. The Merry Muse of Scotland had lost the ear of the polite ; but the common people still heard her gladly. Burns was deeply steeped in this popular tradition ; and his poetic achievement was to fill the old bottles of the makars with the strong, rough wine of popular literature. Hence a new spirit, quite different from the spirit of the makars ; more genial, more democratic.

To speak now of the characteristics of this literature ; and first of its more formal characteristics of metre and diction. Here, as elsewhere, we must distinguish between the native and the Chaucerian schools. The metres of the former are not remarkable. It possessed the rhymed couplet, the ballad-stanza, and sundry allied romance-staves, with their regular ornaments of rhyme, alliteration, and refrain, including that quaint turn which Ellis called the 'bob-wheel'. Its diction is genuinely vernacular, and has the true vernacular virtues of directness and force. It is seen at its raciest in low-life sketches like the *Wife of Auchtermuchty* :—

Then ben thair cam a greidy Sow,
I trow he cund hir little Thank :
For in scho shot hir mekle Mow,
And ay scho winit, and ay scho drank.
He tuke the Kirnstaff be the Schank,
And thocht to reik the Sow a Rout :
The twa left Gaislings gat a Clank—
That straik dang baith their Harns out.

The words are as solid, gross, and palpable as material things.

The technique of the Chaucerian school is much more remarkable, though essentially less sound. At its prime it was perhaps the most accomplished school of verse then extant in Europe. For metres it had taken over Chaucer's stock, and it added many imitations or adaptations of new French stanzas unknown to Chaucer. It handled with extraordinary formal skill a variety of verse-forms too great to enumerate. But two of them are so familiar to us all from Burns that it may be of interest to cite his models. The first is a plain six-line stave :—

Quhome sould I wyt for my Mischance
But *Cupid*, King of Variance,
Thy Court, without Considerance,
Quhen I it knew,
Or ever made the Observance,
Richt sair I knew. [From Scott's *Cupid Quareld*.]

This is the famous 'Scottish Stanza', the metre of Burns's *Address to the Deil* and of many of his finest *Epistles*. The second is more elaborate :—

The Air was sobir, saft and sweit,
 Nae misty Vapours, Wind nor Weit,
 But quyit, calm and clear,
 To foster *Floras* fragrant Flouris,
 Quhairon *Apollos* Paramouris
 Had trinklit mony a Teir ;
 The quhilk like Silver Schaikers shynd,
 Embroydering Bewties Bed,
 Quhairwith their heavy Heids declyned,
 In *Mayis* Collouris cled,
 Sum knoping, sum droping,
 Of balmy Liquor sweit,
 Excelling and smelling
 Throw *Phoebus* hailsum Heit.

[From Montgomery's *The Cherry and the Slae.*]

This is the Quatorzaine or Quattuorzeme, as they called it, the stanza in which the *Jolly Beggars* opens. Montgomery's Quattuorzeme, you will observe, is heavily decorated with alliteration and inner rhyme. The effect, in moderation, is not unpleasing. But the old makars were not always moderate. As they neared the end of a poem, especially, they felt bound to show what they could do in the metrical line. Douglas's *Palice of Honour* is a long dull allegory in a fairly sober nine-line stave ; but towards the close he begins to introduce inner rhymes, first one to a line, then more and more, till at last he has one to every foot and lets off a *feu de joie* of rhyme in which art and sense alike are lost :—

Hail rois, maist chois, till clois thy fois great micht,
 Haill stone whilk shone upon the throne of licht,
 Vertew, quahais trew sweit dew ouirthrew al vice,
 Was ay ilk day, gar say the way of licht ;
 Amend, offend, and send our end ay richt.
 Thow stand, ordant as sanct, of grant maist wise,
 Till be supplie, and the hie grie of price.
 Delite thē tite mee quite of site to dicht,
 For I apply shortlie to thy devise.

This, of course, is merely barbarous ; and even at its best the metrical accomplishment of the old makars is apt to remain somewhat extrinsic and formal. Their addiction to ornament betrays as much. They depend for their effects more on rhythm than on melody. In diction also their love of the grandiose sometimes led them into similar excesses. They would patch their homespun Scots with purple Latinisms, producing stuff like this :—

Hail, sterne superne ! Hail, in eterne,
 In Godis sicht to shyne !
 Lucerne in derne, for to discerne
 Be glory and grace devyne ;
 Hodierne, modern, sempitern,
 Angellicall regyne !
 Our tern infern for to dispern
 Help, ryallest rosyne.¹

This is not Macaronic, as one might suppose : it is Scots in the Grand Style.

Against this it must be remembered that the Scottish Chaucerians greatly extended the compass of Scots verse, and enriched its vocabulary. Even their barbarisms are only the excesses of a true and noble instinct, the instinct for style, which may fairly be claimed as a national

¹ From Dunbar, *Ane Ballat of Our Lady.*

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characteristic. The instinct for style has its dangers, especially when applied to composition in what is not the native idiom. The English prose of Scottish writers is apt to be too literary and rhetorical. They have seldom succeeded—Hume with his French mind is perhaps an exception—in the plain style, a style like Jane Austen's, which is the quintessence of good conversation. On the other hand, this saving grace has generally kept them from that deadly flatness into which English prose so easily falls.

But it is time to turn to less formal characteristics. Our oldest poet, I have said, was Thomas the Rhymer. He is the hero—though not, it is to be feared, the author—of the famous ballad of *True Thomas*; and from that I will begin. Guided by the Fairy Queen, Thomas has taken the road to Elfland, and the poem continues :—

Oh, they rade on and farther on,
And they waded through rivers aboon the knee,
And they saw neither moon nor sun,
But they heard the roaring of the sea.
It was mirk, mirk nicht; there was nae starn-licht,
And they waded through red bluid to the knee;
For a' the bluid that's shed on earth
Rins through the springs of that countrie.

In these astonishing lines we hear unmistakably the note that Arnold taught us to call ‘magical’ and to recognize as ‘Celtic’. It may often be heard in the literature of Scotland. It is the key-note of some of our finest ballads and lyrics of the ballad-age, like *Sweet William’s Ghost*, *The Wife of Usher’s Well*, and the *Lykewake Dirge*. Dunbar’s grim humour turns this supernaturalism into the macabre *Dance of the Seven Deadly Sins*—how different from Spenser’s daylight picture! In this matter Burns was the son of his century. But though he had no superstitions of his own, his peasant birth enabled him to enter into those of his neighbours, and he turned them inside out with many a sly witty touch, insinuating a natural explanation in the guise of an innocent simile or a naïve alternative :—

Ye—like a rash-buss—stood in sicht
Wi’ wavin’ sough.
Awa’ ye swattered—like a drake—
On whistlin’ wings.
The deil—or else an outler quey—
Gat up and gae a croon.
Kirk Alloway was drawing nigh,
Whaur ghaists—and owlets—nightly cry.

Scott’s handling of the supernatural is full of interest. His intellect, like Burns’s, belonged to the eighteenth century; but, unlike Burns, he would fain have believed. Hence his direct treatment of the supernatural in prose is half-hearted, and fails. But when he had learned from the *Lyrical Ballads*—as Professors Dixon and Grierson have pointed out¹—to treat the supernatural subjectively, to show it through the medium of a temperament, he achieved in *Wandering Willie’s Tale* a success as perfect in its way as *The Ancient Mariner*. The serio-comic setting of that story concedes enough to the eighteenth century; but the heart of it is the folk’s shuddering memory of those

¹ See the brilliant note on Coleridge in their *English Parnassus*, from which I have quoted in the next sentence.

'great, reckless men, who had spilled the blood of the saints', and now are burning in hell:—

There was the fierce Middleton, and the dissolute Rothes, and the crafty Lauderdale; and Dalyell, with his bald head and a beard to his girdle; and Earllshall, with Cameron's blude on his hand; and wild Bonshaw, that tied blessed Mr. Cargill's limbs till the blude sprang; and Dunbarton Douglas, the twice-turned traitor baith to country and king. There was the bluidy Advocate MacKenzie, who, for his worldly wit and wisdom, had been to the rest as a god. And there was Claverhouse, as beautiful as when he lived, with his long, dark, curled locks streaming down over his laced buff-coat, and his left hand always on his right spule-blade, to hide the wound that the silver bullet had made.

Stevenson, too, was a master in this kind, and knew it. '*Tod Lapraik*', he says himself, 'is a piece of living Scots; if I had never writ anything but that and *Thrawn Janet*, still I'd have been a writer.' 'Living Scots' they are indeed, not only in language but in substance and spirit. Of other moderns, Hogg at his best has this note in something like the purity of the balladists, as in the wonderful opening and close of *Bonnie Kilmenny*. In George MacDonald it is solemnized by German mysticism into a strain not less impressive for being sometimes incomprehensible.

But I have not quite done with *True Thomas*. Immediately after those 'magical' stanzas, the poem goes on in a very different key:—

Syne they cam to a garden green,
And she pu'd an apple frae a tree.
'Take this for thy wages, True Thomas;
It will give thee the tongue that can never lee.'
'My tongue is my ain,' True Thomas he said;
'A gudeley gift ye wad gie to me!
I neither dought to buy or sell
At fair or tryst where I might be.
I dought neither speak to prince or peer,
Nor ask of grace from fair ladye!'

Those who love racial explanations of literary characteristics will see in this brusque, shrewd humour the canny Lowlander whom they know from fiction. If humour implies, as it seems to do, some perceived incongruity between points of view, then Scottish humour lies above all in the perception of incongruity between the romantic and the practical, the gentle and the vulgar, the general and the personal, the sacred and the profane. Some of these differences, it is not to be denied, correspond to differences between the Celtic and Saxon temperaments, and in the clash of these temperaments Scottish humour finds one of its choicest fields. The encounter between Helen Macgregor and Bailie Nicol Jarvie is perhaps as characteristically Scottish as anything in this kind.

Barbour's *Brus* introduces us to a new set of motives—love of country, freedom and valour—which ever since have inspired Scots literature. Scotland has no monopoly of these virtues; but the literary expression of them in Scots, from Barbour to Campbell, has a peculiar ardency. The aggressive courage of the Scot, before which, in Carlyle's phrase, the foe is 'stubble to our fire', burns in the popular battle-songs of Campbell. English courage is indomitable rather than aggressive; that stubborn hardihood which never knows when it is beaten; and for the perfect expression of that temper we turn to the most English of the English poets, to Milton's

All is not lost; the unconquerable will . . .
And courage never to submit or yield;

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or to Tennyson's

One equal temper of heroie hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will,
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

This is what the Greeks called *καρτερία*, endurance : Scots courage has more of what they called *θράσος*, daring—the quality that Aristotle attributes to the Celts, who, he says, would rush into the sea and fight with the waves, as Cuchullin does in Irish legend.

Intimately connected with these qualities are two others so Scottish that they have no English names. The first is 'daftness'. Not a quality often detected in us by strangers, unless they be as acute as Thackeray or Dickens. But it is there all the same. What English pleader of Pleydell's standing would descend to High Jinks ? What English rascal ever danced and fiddled at the gallows-foot like the winsome Gilderoy ?

The next is 'kindliness', in its original sense of the feeling that we have for our own kin ; as when the dying Douglas says,

Let never living creature ken
That a kindly Scot lies here.

This feeling is very strong in the Scottish nature. In our bleak world the heart clings desperately to home and family ; domestic affection becomes a tragic passion. No writer has felt this like Mr. Barrie. His *Window in Thrums* is the tragedy of family love. In other circumstances this passion may be perverted to a hatred no less devouring : the *Master of Ballantrae* is the tragedy of fraternal hate. It is this tragic intensity, this capacity for a devotion beyond death, that gives us whatever is noblest in the Scottish treatment of the theme of love. This is the key-note of *Helen of Kirkconnel*, of the *Lowlands of Holland*, of the *Border Widow's Lament*. The Scottish nature is capable of this tragic devotion not only to persons but to ideals and causes, even to visionary ideals and causes already lost. Covenanter and Jacobite had this in common, that both fought for a dream. The capacity for ideal devotion is the most precious part of our Scottish heritage.

More widely diffused, this kindness appears as 'clannishness'. I know not how far the clan-system may have helped it, with the sense of equality that comes from a common ancestry ; how far it may be due to the long struggle for national independence ; how far to the equalitarian traditions of Presbyterianism ; but it is certain that the national temper of Scotland is more democratic than that of England, and class barriers are less insurmountable. No man was ever less of a Jacobin than Sir Walter ; yet even Sir Walter felt that in the great crises of life all Scotsmen, if not all men, are equal. When Edie Ochiltree and the Wardours are cut off by the tide,

'Good man,' said the baronet, 'can you think of nothing ?—of no help ?—I'll make you rich—I'll give you a farm—I'll —'

'Our riches will soon be equal,' said the beggar, looking out upon the strife of the waters.

Hence, too, the unforced sympathy with which Scots literature has treated the annals of the poor. Poverty is the burden of Mr. Barrie's *Auld Licht Idylls*, poverty and that terror of the 'poor house' which Barrie, rather than Dickens, has added to the themes of literature.

Scott, too, has touched finely upon the sorrows of the poor in the noble episode of the Mucklebackits. But Burns—and this is the true test of the democratic temper—Burns would sympathize with the joys of the poor as well as their sorrows ; and not the decent poor only, but the 'rantin' gangrel bodies' who

At Posie Nancie's held their splore
To drink their orra duddies.

It gives a strange thrill to the reader of the *Jolly Beggars* to recall, what Scott positively asserts, that Burns himself did seriously contemplate such an end to his own life, seriously looked forward to coming to this at the last, and taking (as we say in Angus) to the pock and the string :—

The last o't, the warst o't,
Is only but to beg.
And when I downa' yoke a naig,
Then, Lord be thankit, I can beg.

Nothing has done more to foster the democratic temper in Scotland than the fact that Burns was poor. Scott never forgot it. In his intercourse with working-people there was always in his mind the thought that Burns was their brother.

What touches the Scots poet most in the lot of the poor is their constant struggle with the inclemency of Nature. Inclemency, indeed, is the aspect of Nature most vividly present to the Scots mind :—

When hailstanes drive wi' bitter skyte,
And infant frosts begin to bite
In hoary cranreuch drest.

But it is generally a personal reference that gives poignancy to the scene :—

Spare my love, ye winds that blaw,
Plashy sleet and beating rain.

This sympathy extends beyond the loved one to all poor houseless wretches :—

To lie in kilns and barns at e'en,
When banes are crazed and bluid is thin,
Is, doubtless, great distress,

says Burns ; and Stevenson echoes him :—

I mind me on the hoastin' weans,
The penny joes on causey stanes,
The auld folk with their crazy banes,
Baith auld and puir,
How they maun thole the winds and rains,
And labour sair.

Even the dumb animals are not forgotten :—

I mind me on the oorie cattle,
And silly sheep, that bide the brattle
O' winter's war;

nor the flowers of the field :—

Cauld blew the bitter biting north
Upon thy early humble birth—

so Burns addresses the mountain daisy. Yet when Nature does smile upon the Scots poet, he responds with a warm, homely affection not easy

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to parallel from English literature. Here are some verses—gathered on a hint from Henley—in which Burns describes running water :—

The Muse, nae poet ever fand her
Till by himsel' he learned to wander
Adoon some trottin' burns meander,
And no think lang.

On ilka hand the burnies trot
And meet below my theekit cot ;
The scented birk and hawthorn white
Across the pool their arms unite,
Alike to screen the birdie's nest
And little fishes' caller rest.

Ye burnies, wimplin' doon your glens
Wi' toddlin' din,
Or foaming strang, wi' hasty stens,
Frae lin to lin.

Whiles o'er a linn the burnie plays,
As through the glen it wimpled ;
Whiles round a rocky scaur it strays ;
Whiles in a weil it dimpled ;
Whiles glittered to the nightly rays
Wi' bickerin' dancin' dazzle ;
Whiles cookit underneath the braes
Below the spreading hazel
Unseen that night.

What strikes one first as peculiarly Scottish in these verses is the intimate, almost domestic, touch given by the diminutives and by words like 'trot' and 'toddle'. The great English poets love and worship Nature as a mother or a goddess ; in these familiar, kindly aspects Burns dotes on her as a child. I do not know where to look in English poetry for just this touch of homely affection.

These verses have another Scottish quality which you cannot have failed to remark in all the extracts that I have quoted. I mean an intense vividness of detail—which we now call realism, what an older generation called 'particularity'. In some of our literature this 'particularity' takes one very objectionable form. 'Literary Scots,' says Professor Saintsbury, 'at all times up to the eighteenth century admitted a coarseness of actual language which is rarely paralleled in literary English.' The charge, unhappily, is just ; but you will not expect me to illustrate it.

Let me close rather by exhibiting this peculiar Scottish gift of 'particularity' in a more pleasing but not less characteristic form, namely in its treatment of external nature. Critics as distinguished as Mr. Stopford Brooke have claimed for the Scots poets a peculiarly keen sense of colour. And certainly a stanza like this of Dunbar's seems (if you will pardon the phrase) to give some colour to their contention :—

The chrystall air, the sapher firmament,
The ruby skyés of the orient
Kest beriall bemes on emerant bewes grene.
The rosy garth, depaynt and redolent,
With purpur, azure, gold and gules gent
Arrayed was, by dame Flora the quene.

But we must not make too much of this. It is largely a matter of words, rather than of sensations ; part of that 'aureate' diction of which I have already given an extravagant example. I am not con-

cerned to deny that some Scots poets have a keen sense of colour ; but it should scarcely be considered a national gift. It is a part, and not the most characteristic part, of a more general gift, which indeed in its wider extension may fairly be claimed as national—the gift of visuality, the imagination of the eye. The appeal of Scots poetry is mainly to the eye. Its appeal to the ear, though strong, is not peculiarly subtle ; is certainly not irresistible. But Scots literature possesses in a striking degree the power of seizing a moving spectacle at its most pictorial moment and of stamping that moment on the eye in a flash. For this effect, however, it relies in the main not upon colour, as we commonly understand colour, but specifically upon light and shade, the mixture of lights, and the absolute contrast of white upon black. In Scott's description of Melrose Abbey there is one bold dash of colour :—

Full in the midst his cross of red
Triumphant Michael brandished.
The moon-beam kissed the holy pane,
And threw on the pavement a bloody stain—

—a fine dash of colour indeed, though it pales a little by comparison with Keats's

And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast

—but the main effect depends not on colour but on the contrast of light and shade, on the moonlight in which

Buttress and buttress alternately
Seemed framed of ebon and ivory,

and on the sudden burst of lamplight from the opened tomb, which streams up to the chancelled roof like the blessed light of heaven, and in which that one dash of colour is obliterated and lost.

That Burns had this gift, as he had all Scottish gifts, is demonstrated by the blazing interior of Alloway Kirk :—

Coffins stood round like open presses,
That shawd the deid in their last dresses ;
And, by some devilish cantrip sleight,
Each in its cauld hand held a light.

But the ‘cantrip sleight’ is the poet's, not the devil's. The comment betrays the creative glee of the conscious artist.

Stevenson was as much critic as artist, and his deliberate use of this appeal to the eye is avowed most instructively in his Letters. ‘Vital,’ he says, ‘that's what I'm at first ; wholly vital, with a buoyancy of life. Then lyrical, if it may be, and picturesque, always with an epic value of scenes, so that the figures remain in the mind's eye for ever.’ There are two such scenes in the *Master of Ballantrae* which certainly remain in the mind's eye for ever, by virtue chiefly of this pure contrast of light and shade. ‘The first is the duel by candle-light :—

I took up the candlesticks and went before them . . . there was no breath stirring ; a windless stricture of frost had bound the air ; and as we went forth in the shine of the candles, the blackness was like a roof over our heads. . . . ‘Here is the place,’ said the Master. ‘Set down the candles.’ I did as he bid me, and presently the flames went up, as steady as in a chamber, in the midst of the frosted trees, and I saw these two brothers take their places. ‘The light is something in my eyes,’ said the Master. ‘I will give you every advantage,’ replied Mr. Henry, shifting his ground, ‘for I think you are about to die.’

The second is from the adventure of the Chevalier Burke :—

The sipaye led me forward accordingly to a place from which I had a clear view of the house. It was surrounded by a wide verandah ; a lamp, very well trimmed, stood upon the floor of it, and on either side of it sat a man, cross-legged, after the Oriental fashion. Both, besides, were bundled up in muslin like two natives ; and yet one of them was . . . that very Master of Ballantrae of whose gallantry and genius I have had to speak so often. . . . I stepped plainly forth into the light of the moon, which shone exceeding strong, and hailing Ballantrae by name, made him in a few words master of my grievous situation. . . . Ballantrae never moved a muscle, staring at me like an image in a pagoda.

The finest instance of all I have kept to the last. In the variety of its appeal, and in the peculiar nature and force of its contrasts, it is perhaps the most typical scene in the whole of Scots literature. It is the death of old Dumbiedykes. Winter is raging without ; indoors the old miser is dying. He has driven doctor and minister from his room with curses ; but he cannot die in peace for the thought of the poor houseless tenants whom he has evicted, and who may now be perishing in the snow.

' Bring me the brandy-bottle, Jenny,' he cried, with a voice in which passion contended with pain. ' I can die as I have lived without fashing ony o' them. But there 's ae thing,' he said, sinking his voice—' there 's ae fearful thing hings about my heart, and an anker of brandy winna wash it away.—The Deanses at Woodend !—I seqes-trated them in the dear years, and now they are to flit, they'll starve—and that Beersheba, and that auld trooper's wife and her oe, they'll starve—they'll starve !—Look out, Jock ; what kind o' night is't ? '

' On-ding o' snaw, father,' answered Jock, after having opened the window, and looked out with great composure.

' They'll perish in the drifts ! ' said the expiring sinner—' they'll perish wi' cauld !—but I'll be het eneugh, gin a' tales be true.'



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